

The persistent drought, coupled with a late, cool, and wet spring to our north, appear to have affected nesters both within the Region and beyond this season. Apparent nest failures in some plains-nesting pelicans and charadriiforms may have caused the higher concentrations of American White Pelicans, Marbled Godwits, and Franklin's Gulls observed away from nesting areas in July. In contrast, drought conditions may have benefited the dry-flats nesting plovers—Snowy and Piping—in Nebraska. But drought may also have caused a paucity of hummingbirds, which usually become more evident in the fall reporting season. In general, marsh birds were scarcer than in wet years but possibly more concentrated towards the southeastern reaches of the Region. Perhaps a pattern is the more evident summering in the Region by species that nest on the tundra or muskeg, e.g., Red-throated Loon, Harris's Sparrow.

Abbreviations: Hackberry (Hackberry Flat W.M.A., Tillman, OK); Harlan (Harlan County Res., Harlan, NE); McCaughy (L. McCaughy, Keith, NE); Quivira (Quivira N.W.R., Stafford, KS); Rainwater Basin (playa wetlands of s.-cen. Nebraska); Red Slough (Red Slough W.M.A., McCurtain, OK); Salt Plains (Salt Plains N.W.R., Alfalfa, OK).

LOONS THROUGH WATERFOWL

Nebraska's 4th spring Red-throated Loon in Scotts Bluff remained through 20 Jun when it was mostly in alternate plumage (PEL, JO). Unexpected so far s. in summer was an Eared Grebe at Hackberry 18 Jul (JAG). The best count of Western Grebes this season was 1715 at McCaughy 19 Jun (SJD), a breeding location; most were probably non-breeders or failed breeders. Up to 7 Clark's Grebes were at McCaughy through 20 Jun (*vide* WRS). More American White Pelicans were in the Region this season, perhaps due to the nesting failures in North Dakota. About 1000 were reported in Nebraska (*vide* WRS), with 350–400 in Platte 19 Jun (TJW). A Brown Pelican at Harlan 20 Jun (ph. SJD) through 10 Jul (LR, RH) furnished the 6th documented Nebraska record, all in the period 12 May–10 Jul. Up to 2 Neotropic Cormorants were noted again this year in Coffey, KS 19 Jun (NL); up to 2 were at Hackberry, where also rare, 13–28 Jul (VF, m.ob.). The 21 Anhingas at Red Slough 13 Jul (DA, m.ob.) made an excellent tally, with one as far n. as Muskogee, OK 10 Jul (KMy).

A species rare and patchily distributed in the Region is Least Bittern; 2 were in Douglas, KS 20 Jun (DS) and 8–10 were at Red Slough 8–30 Jun (DA, m.ob.). Single Least were noted in Oklahoma 26 Jul (DMo) and Tulsa 13 Jul (JL, PS). Generally rare in the Region, presumed post-breeding Tricolored Herons included a single at Quivira 18 Jul

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(PJ) and up to 2 at Red Slough 21–27 Jul (DA, m.ob.); at least one pair continues to nest at Salt Plains (PJ, m.ob.), where juvs. were also noted (RS, JWA, JC, JS). Wandering northward was a first-year Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in Knox, NE 9 Jun, the 3rd for n. Nebraska (MB); 5 ads. were in Douglas, KS 20 Jun (DS) and 2 in Jefferson, KS 25 Jun (JB). Still amazing were the 321 White Ibis at Red Slough 13 Jul, the high count there for the season (DA). A single Glossy Ibis at Salt Plains 16 Jun (MK) was joined by 2 others 21 Jun (JWA, JC, JS, PJ), a lower total than expected there in recent years. With them were up to 2 birds judged to be Glossy Ibis x White-faced Ibis hybrids 21 Jun (JWA, JC, JS). Three Plegadis were at Red Slough on 10 Jun (DA). Unexpected in Kansas was a single Roseate Spoonbill at Quivira 22 Jul (TA, MRo), while Red Slough had 2–5 birds, the first 2 appearing 15 Jun (DA, m.ob.). As with White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork is expected in the Region only at Red Slough, where 14 arrived

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Snowy Plovers fared very well in the Southern Great Plains in summer 2004. This bird at Lake McConaughy, Keith County, Nebraska 19 June 2004 was one of at least 20 in the area, where at least three nests were discovered this season. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore.

15 Jun and as many as 42 were present through 30 Jun (DA, m.ob.).

Red Slough also hosted 2–6 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks through the period (DA, m.ob.); 2 straggled n. to *Sequoyah*, OK 2 Jul (LF). A small “Canada Goose” summering in *Clay* was identified as a Cackling Goose (JGJ), providing a first summer record for Nebraska. Mid-summer sightings of diving ducks away from their breeding ranges are few; these included a female Canvasback at McConaughy 19 Jun (SJD) and a Ring-necked Duck at Red Slough 21 Jun (DA, m.ob.). Quite unexpected in Jun, single Red-breasted Mergansers were in *Riley*, KS 9 Jun (DM), in *Shawnee*, KS 7 Jun (DM), and at Harlan 20 Jun (SJD).

RAPTORS THROUGH SHOREBIRDS

An Osprey in *Lincoln*, NE 23 Jul (TJW) was rather early. Mississippi Kites were breeding n. to *Johnson*, KS, with a single chick and 2 recently fledged young in late Jul (ML, MG). A female Northern Harrier was observed on mined land in *Linn*, KS 13 Jun (MM), possibly breeding there. Summer records of Sharp-shinned Hawk in e. parts of the Region are intriguing; singles were in *Nemaha*, NE 13 Jun (JSt) and at Red Slough 21 Jul (DA). A Broad-winged Hawk in *Ellis*, KS 25 Jul (PJ, GF) was likely an early fall migrant, also somewhat westerly. The Omaha, Nebraska Peregrine Falcons, Zeus and Amelia, fledged 3 young (JD); this same

pair has been present since 2000. A single Peregrine was in *Olathe*, KS for most of the summer (*vide* LM).

King Rails, relatively rare in the Region, were reported at Red Slough 30 Jun (an ad. with 4 imms.; DA) and at Hackberry 26 Jul (one; DB, VF, JW). Common Moorhens were found only at Red Slough, where the peak count was an impressive 51 on 13 Jul (DA). Very exciting was the major increase in numbers of breeding Snowy Plovers at two major reservoirs in Nebraska, where drought conditions and irrigation draw-downs exposed extensive sandy flats. As many as 20 individuals and three or more nests were located at McConaughy (GW, *vide* SJD), with 2 pairs 20 Jun at Harlan (SJD). Record numbers of Piping Plovers were also at McConaughy this summer: 300+ individuals and 120+ nests were found (GW, SJD). At Harlan, five broods were present 20 Jun (SJD), and in *Scotts Bluff*, a pair had a nest 19 Jun (SJD). The “latest” spring date for Semipalmated Plover in Nebraska was established by 2–3 at McConaughy 19–20 Jun (SJD). Black-necked Stilt numbers are also increasing rapidly in the w. Sandhills of Nebraska, with about 55 individuals and eight breeding pairs, 6 confirmed with chicks, at several wetlands in *Sheridan* and *Garden* 3–5 Jul (JGJ). An additional two pairs of Black-necked Stilts bred in *Scotts Bluff*, NE, producing at least one brood (KD, PEL, JO,

AK). Other good stilt counts were up to 70 at Hackberry 25 Apr–5 Jun (L&MT, K&SM) and 17 in *Sheridan*, NE 5 Jun (JED). High counts of American Avocet were 300 in *nw. Garden*, NE 5 Jul (JGJ) and up to 73 at Hackberry 15 May–5 Jun (L&MT, JT).

Greater Yellowlegs at Salt Plains 21 Jun (JWA, JC, JS) and Harlan 22 Jun (G&WH) were about on time for first fall migrants; late for spring was one at Hackberry 5 Jun (L&MT). A good Willet count was 60 in s. *Sheridan*, NE 14 Jun (JED). A Spotted Sandpiper at Red Slough 6 Jul (DA) was a bit earlier than expected for fall migrants. An excellent tally was the 200 Long-billed Curlews in *Garden*, NE 12 Jul (JTo). A Long-billed Curlew dallied until 5 Jun at Hackberry (L&MT). Marbled Godwit may have suffered a serious setback in breeding within its normal range, as large numbers appeared in Nebraska beginning with 5 in *Garden* 9 Jun (CNK) and 18 in *Sheridan* 14 Jun (JED) and an amazing 186 at McConaughy 20 Jun (SJD, WRS, KN).

As always, sorting out the status of mid-summer shorebirds can be guesswork (i.e., late spring, early fall, or summer lingerer). Perhaps record late were 3 Semipalmated Sandpipers at McConaughy 19 Jun (SJD). The 3 Least Sandpipers at McConaughy 19–20 Jun (SJD) and one at Harlan 20 Jun (SJD) were probably southbound. Any White-rumped Sandpiper in the Region would seem more likely to be a late spring migrant: one in *Clay*, NE 26 Jun was extremely late, if northbound at all (JGJ). Also on the cusp of the migration seasons were single Baird’s Sandpipers at McConaughy and Harlan, an injured Pectoral Sandpiper at Harlan, 3 Stilt Sandpipers at McConaughy (and one injured at Harlan), and an alternate-plumaged ad. Long-billed Dowitcher at Harlan—all 20 Jun (SJD). An ad. Dunlin at Hackberry 11 Jun (L&MT) was likely a summer vagrant. Four Stilt Sandpipers at Hackberry 5 Jun (L&MT) were very late for Oklahoma. Rare were 5 Short-billed Dowitchers at Red Slough 21 Jul (DA, JSi, SJ). Unexpected were a Wilson’s Phalarope at Salt Plains 22 Jun (JWA, JC, JS) and 2 male Red-necked Phalaropes at McConaughy 19 Jun (SJD).

GULLS THROUGH HUMMINGBIRDS

Rare but regular, ad. Laughing Gulls were reported at Salt Plains 21 Jun (JWA, JC, JS), in *Scotts Bluff*, NE 18 Jun (WRS, KN), and at McConaughy 20 Jun (SJD, WRS, KN), the latter displaying to uninterested

Franklin's Gulls. As with white pelicans, Franklin's Gulls also appeared in unusual numbers in midsummer, indicative of failed breeding, with 730 at McConaughy 20 Jun (SJD). A single Franklin's Gull was unexpected in *Wagoner*, OK 27 Jun and 3 Jul (JWA). A first-alternate Bonaparte's Gull at McConaughy 19 Jun (SJD) was a potentially record-late spring date for Nebraska. The best count of California Gulls was from McConaughy, 21 on 20 Jun (SJD). Two Californias were in *Scotts Bluff*, NE 2 Jun (PEL, JO). An ad. Herring Gull at McConaughy 19 Jun was the first Nebraska record of an ad. during summer; it was accompanied by 5 juvs. (SJD, WRS, KN). Other summer surprises were a first-alternate Lesser Black-backed Gull at McConaughy 19 Jun (SJD, WRS, KN), and a much more surprising first-summer Great Black-backed Gull 15–16 May and 19–20 Jun (SJD, WRS, KN). Common Terns of uncertain status were a single in *Scotts Bluff*, NE 13 Jun (KD) and 7 at McConaughy 20 Jun (SJD).

A White-winged Dove, now *passé* in Oklahoma, was in *Sarpy*, NE 4–18 Jun (JA); 5 were reported in Kansas (*fide* LM). Black-billed Cuckoos, all from Nebraska, included singles at two different locations in *Lincoln* 5 & 9 Jun (TJW) and in *Dixon* (JJ). Rarely reported in se. Oklahoma, up to 2 Barn Owls were at Red Slough 21–27 Jul (DA, JP). The only reported Long-eared Owl nesting was in *Sheridan*, NE 7 Jun (Sjo).

The rarest bird of the summer had to be the female **Magnificent Hummingbird** photographed at the Dailey farm in *Chautauqua*, KS 11–18 Jul (M&EC, m.ob.), the 3rd for Kansas and the Region, all in the period 18 Apr–18 Jul (*fide* MT). Westerly were 2 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in *Lincoln*, NE 9 May–13 Jun (TJW). The earliest Nebraska fall record for Broad-tailed Hummingbird was furnished by one in *Scotts Bluff* 16 Jul (KD). Rufous Hummingbirds appeared Regionwide in small numbers by late Jul; the earliest was in *Logan*, OK 22 Jul (BL).

PASSERINES

An apparent migrant Western Wood-Pewee was e. of typical range in *Scott*, KS 1 Jun (T&SS). Single Eastern Wood-Pewees in *Harlan*, NE 5 Jun (G&WH) and in *Furnas*, NE 10 Jul (LR, RH) were westerly, with one northwesterly in *Custer*, NE (TJW). Southeasterly was a singing Least Flycatcher in *Saunders*, NE 19 Jun (CNK). A developing s. outpost for Willow Flycatcher is Red Slough, where 10 territories were mapped 6 Jul (DA, m.ob.) and two nests located. A migrant Willow Flycatcher appeared in *Blaine*, OK 27 Jul (JAG). An unexpected appearance of Say's Phoebe occurred in *Dixon*,

ne. Nebraska 9 Jul (JJ). Previous westward expansion of Great Crested Flycatcher in Nebraska had been along well-wooded riparian corridors, but several sightings in Jun were of birds using non-riparian shrub-woodland. There were 10 birds located in *Lincoln*, NE 5 Jun (TJW), 3 in *Franklin*, NE 6 Jun (LR, RH), and one in *Sheridan*, NE 9 Jun (CNK); a pair nested in *Scott*, KS (T&SS). Rare in extreme se. Oklahoma, 2–6 Western Kingbirds were in *McCurtain* through the period (DA, m.ob.). Scissor-tailed Flycatchers expanding northward into Nebraska included a pair nesting in *Gage* first noted 9 Jun (B&LP).

Cowbird trapping and prescribed burning in the Wichita Mts., OK has clearly created a haven for Black-capped Vireos; over 2000 pairs were estimated from this year's territory mapping (JAG, VF, SW, RW et al.); nevertheless, this remains essentially an isolated population. Bell's Vireo numbers in cen. Nebraska were excellent: 15 were in *Valley* 13 Jun (LR, RH), 12 singing males were in *Lincoln* 4 Jun (TJW), and 10 were in se. *Lincoln* 5 Jun (TJW). Late migrant or vagrant Plumbeous Vireos were in *Sioux*, NE 5 Jun and 26 Jul (HKH). Totally disoriented was a Blue-headed Vireo in *Osage*, OK 26 Jun (DH). At the edge of their expanding range in se. Kansas, 3 Fish Crows were in *Wilson* 14 Jul (GP, DS) and one in *Montgomery* 18 Jul (SS, MR).

A juv. Red-breasted Nuthatch with 2 ads. in *Cherry*, NE 12 Jun (KP) was the first breeding report there since 1980. Only the 2nd Jul record for Nebraska, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet was in *Sioux* 26 Jul (HKH). A Wood Thrush in *Ellsworth*, KS 26 Jun (MR) was quite far w. of the usual summer range, while the still far-out-of-range male Curve-billed Thrasher in *Sioux*, NE persisted into its 2nd year there (LFr, AK), this summer feeding Common Grackle and American Robin fledglings (LFr). Very rare during summer in Oklahoma were 2 Cedar Waxwings in *Delaware* 27 Jun (E&FH).

A Tennessee Warbler was tardy in *Washington*, NE 2 Jun (JTo). Extensive surveys of likely Cerulean Warbler breeding habitat in e. Nebraska yielded only 5–7 singing males, with only one female detected (WRS, BFH). A first-ever Jul record of Wilson's Warbler for Nebraska was furnished by one in *Sioux* 29 Jul (HKH). Although usually a late migrant in spring, a Canada Warbler in *Tulsa*, OK 22 Jun (JL, PS) was clearly pushing the limit.

Well w. of expected were up to 6 Scarlet Tanagers in *Osage*, OK 26 Jun (DH). Certainly westerly was an Eastern Towhee in *Lincoln*, NE 5 Jun (TJW). A Bachman's Sparrow at Red Slough 21 Jun (DA, M&LM) was a rare find there. Far from its taiga home, a singing Harris's Sparrow in a

Dixon, NE yard 23 Jun may have been the same bird as noted there 8 Jun 2003 (JJ). Was the Dark-eyed Junco eating spilled bird seed inside a Wal-Mart store in Omaha, NE from the winter through 22 Jun (DSt) part of a marketing ploy? Granivores (and not just House Sparrows and House Finches) are observed very commonly in such large "box" stores throughout the continent.

Westerly Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were in *Sioux*, NE 2 Jun (PEL, JO) and at a *Scotts Bluff* feeder—with a Black-headed Grosbeak family—24 Jul (KD). Quite unusual during summer was a Black-headed Grosbeak in *Oklahoma*, OK 26–27 Jul (TU). An easterly Lazuli Bunting (that appeared not to be of hybrid derivation) was in *York*, NE 19 Jun (LR, RH), and similarly "pure" Indigos were westward in *Dawes*, NE 22 Jun (SA) and *Scotts Bluff*, NE 17 Jul (AK). An excellent Bobolink count was of 125 in *Cherry*, NE 8 Jun (CNK), but plowing of Conservation Reserve grassland in *Dixon*, NE reduced numbers there (JJ). An early migrant slightly e. of usual, a Yellow-headed Blackbird was in *Tulsa* 13 Jul (PP). Also easterly was a black-backed male Lesser Goldfinch in *Sedgwick*, KS 25 Jul (BR); this form is reported more often in the Region than the green-backed form.

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State of the Region

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The Southern Great Plains Region receives 20–40 inches of rain per year and is thus largely dominated by grassland habitats, but among the states of Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma there exists a remarkable diversity of both grassland and woodland habitats, represented by six ecoregions or Bird Conservation Regions (BCR). Sadly, most places in the Southern Great Plains have been so altered since the start of European settlement that relatively few carry traces of historical habitats. A Plains traveler of 150 years ago would have found broad horizons and remarkable abundances of wildlife: the seemingly limitless seas of grass were continuous across the major river systems in most western areas, with countless bison and prairie-chickens, unimaginably extensive prairie dog colonies, and inestimable numbers of spring migrant American Golden-Plovers and Eskimo Curlews. The Ozarks and Ouachitas of eastern Oklahoma (BCR 24, 25) were extensively forested, and Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Passenger Pigeon, and Carolina Parakeet were documented in the Region. Washington Irving, in *Crayon Miscellany* of 1835, commented on traveling for endless days in 1825–1826 through an incredibly dense maze of Post Oak and Blackjack scrub, only to break out onto treeless plains in what is now central Oklahoma. An early account from Kingfisher County, Oklahoma in the late 1800s commented on the harvest of riparian Cottonwood for firewood—and on the subsequent need to burn buffalo chips, after the Cottonwoods had been logged out.

The tall-grass prairies (BCR 22) that once dominated the eastern border of the Region have been largely converted to agricultural fields and grasslands of exotic species. Few intact patches of true tall-grass prairies exist, totaling less than 5% of past area, and what remains is severely fragmented. The prairie-chickens have been reduced to a tiny fraction of past abundance, while Henslow's Sparrows persist at perhaps 1% of historical populations. Likewise, the short-grass plains (BCR 18) on the western border of the Region and the central mixed-grass prairies (BCR 19) that cover most of the centers of Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma are similarly fragmented and degraded, owing to intensive monocultural agriculture, especially wheat in western Kansas and cotton in western Oklahoma, and related development. That region's rich soils were swept away in the Dustbowl years of the 1930s, a devastating period for the biotic communities of the western Plains. Though awe-inspiring flocks of cranes, geese, and other transient and wintering species are still to be seen across the Region, gone, for the most part, are the Region's bison herds, while prairie dogs have been reduced to less than 2% of their original numbers. In the short-grass regions, with the decline of prairie dogs has come a comparable decline in raptors, especially prairie specialists such as Ferruginous Hawk, and also a near-eradication of Burrowing Owls, which rely on prairie dogs for burrows. Mountain Plover, Long-billed Curlew, McCown's Longspur, and Lark Bunting have also declined precipitously in these mixed-grass habitats: the early descriptions of the buntings' abundance defy imagining. The mixed-grass prairies farther east have also seen declines in representative breeding species such as Upland Sandpiper. Collectively, these ailing specialist species hint at larger problems for grassland ecosystems as a whole.

Grassland birds are clearly among the most imperiled of North American birds, as evidenced in the persistent and continuing declines of both Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens, both birds of truly open prairies. The issues they face are symptomatic of the general patterns of change occurring in the plains and prairies. Evolving in a system of endless grasslands, prairie-chickens could undertake mass local, even perhaps distant migrations in search of optimal habitat. Human encroachment now severely limits such movements. Both the increase in the human population and the changes in ownership patterns have fragmented suitable habitat, most of which is marginal to begin with. With more plots now falling under corporate ownership—where sterile, modern agriculture is a rule, and where such industries as pig and chicken farms have become vast assembly-line processes—prairie-chickens have declined or disappeared across many recent strongholds. In addition, center-pivot irrigation has made once inhospitable areas now suitable for more intensive agriculture, with its broad application of pesticides, rodenticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. The range-wide decline of Loggerhead Shrike is poorly understood, but some researchers attribute it to this chemical manipulation of the landscape for agriculture. Though hardly common here, Loggerhead Shrike's stronghold lies arguably in the plains and prairies.

Another insidious factor in the decline of these flagship prairie species is woody encroachment, a consequence of fire suppression. In addition, the continuing increase and expansion of junipers, essentially weed species in this environment, can convert prairie to cedar-brake in a generation. Fire suppression also allows junipers to encroach and to dominate in cross-timber habitats, where the junipers replace fire-adapted scrub oaks capable of regenerating from their rootstocks after a wild fire. Even the oaks now reach heights probably not maintained in recent historical times. While this encroachment may benefit the spread of some woody and scrubland bird species, fire suppression has also played a prominent role in the decline of the very local Black-capped Vireo in BCR 21 (Oaks and Prairies) of central Oklahoma—an endangered species whose populations are reduced but now stable in Oklahoma but extirpated from Kansas. Along the Platte River, and possibly other river corridors in the Region, fire suppression has resulted in cottonwood encroachment along river banks, with a resulting loss of shallow wetlands that are used by migrating Whooping Cranes and other wetland species.

But the inverse of fire suppression is perhaps a more immediate threat to prairie-chickens and other species: the recent practice of intensive spring burnings and cattle-stocking in the Flint Hills and Osage Plains of Kansas, described in a recent article in this journal (*N.A.B.* 56: 239–244), has clearly caused prairie-chicken populations to plummet in their stronghold. *The decline in prairie*

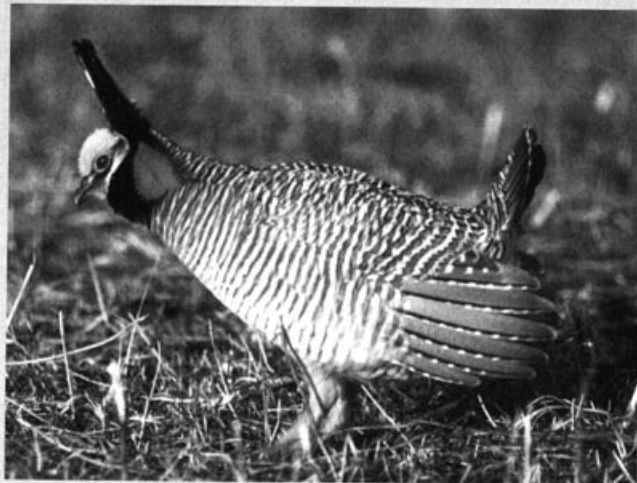
species on land used in this manner demands immediate action by conservation organizations: the Flint Hills, for instance, contain the largest remaining tract of tall-grass prairie.

The recent construction of wind-farms presents another potential threat to prairie birds. The understanding of wind-farms' impacts on birdlife is still developing, but such farms are already recognized as disruptive and detrimental to prairie-chickens' reproductive success. Their prominence in some of the highest terrain and most wind-swept areas also poses potential threats to foraging raptors and to many migrating birds, particularly those that fly close to the surface, such as some shorebirds, waterfowl, and Franklin's Gulls. At under 400 feet tall, they probably pose much less threat to nocturnal migrants than do the proliferating television, cell-phone, and radio towers, although they occur in conglomerates numbering several hundred. More research is needed to determine the impacts of such "green" technologies on prairie birds, but it is clear that such wind-farms should never be placed in ecologically sensitive areas.

Water bodies, once rare in this relatively dry Region, now collectively surpass even the 10,000 lakes of Minnesota, but the increase in artificial lakes and reservoirs has come at the great expense of native riparian habitats in many areas. Overall, as is true over most of the West, issues of water use and allocation are currently—and will continue to be—contentious matters on the western Great Plains. For instance, the re-licensing of power production at Kingsley Dam, which impounds Lake McConaughy in Nebraska, has taken many years, the main sticking points being allocation of impounded water between recreation, wildlife, and agriculture, with control of stream flows paramount. High spring flows scour the main channel, leaving sandbars for nesting Piping Plovers and Least Terns and roosting Sandhill Cranes. But a myriad of demands for this water supply, from irrigation to recreation needs, dampens flows. The result is a loss of critical habitat, which is particularly acute in drought years. Some reservoirs, of course, create major and significant new habitats for a great variety of waterbirds and shorebirds, even marsh birds. Tenkiller Lake in eastern Oklahoma has become a virtual Mecca for loons, where four species now normally winter. And even the dynamics of drought in such environments can have positive impacts, as on numbers of Piping Plovers and Snowy Plovers in the Region, where the drying flats around reservoir beds create expanses of important breeding habitat.

One cannot, finally, summarize conservation issues on the Plains without raising the complex matter of cowbirds and other icterids. The historical stronghold for the cowbird has been the Great Plains; when the Plains teemed with bison, the cowbirds followed these nomadic herds. The conversion of most of the Region's prairies to agricultural lands—with essentially sedentary cattle and other livestock, as well as an abundance of grain—has made the cowbirds' modern environment more predictable, widespread, and constant. The result has been that their practice of brood parasitism, once more localized, has become widespread, to the detriment of many prairie species. Most readily noted in this context is the decline in Black-capped Vireo (with its very limited range), but Bell's Vireo and Orchard Oriole have also declined, while some species such as Prairie Warbler have become more restricted in range. Other icterids such as Common and Great-tailed Grackle have increased or invaded; both depredate significant numbers of nests, possibly limiting some marshland birds (e.g., Least Bitterns) in the case of the large Great-tailed.

Although all of the issues mentioned in this overview are far more complex than can be countenanced here, the conservation priorities for this three-state Region could not be clearer: to preserve existing native grasslands and prairie, and to restore as much agricultural and other degraded land to native habitat as possible, so as to ensure the survival of prairie birds into the future.



A flagship species of the short-grass prairies, Lesser Prairie-Chicken (here near Arnett, Oklahoma) has declined in number an estimated 97% since the nineteenth century; from 1963 to 1980, the global population—now restricted to fragments of habitat in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas—declined by 78%, and most remaining birds are on private land. The High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk has tried to create voluntary grassland restoration projects to benefit this and other species, and The Nature Conservancy recently purchased the Creamer Ranch in New Mexico, with 40 leks of the species, which is listed as "Vulnerable" to extinction by BirdLife International. Photograph by Joseph A. Grzybowski.